

Story 1762 (1994 Tape 4)

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The Man From Kayseri¹ and the Professor

One day a man from Kayseri boarded a train to go somewhere. He was a peasant, and this was the first time that he had ever ridden on a train. When he climbed up into the train, it was obvious that he was a villager, for he had a cap upon his head, a heybe² on his back, çarıks³ upon his feet. He walked through several of cars to see what they were like. As he did so, one of the passengers attracted his attention. That passenger was wearing a modern, broad-brimmed hat, a white shirt, and a necktie. The Kayserian wondered, "Who is that?" He had never seen before a person who looked like that, and he

¹People from the province of Kayseri (and especially its capital city, of the same name) are stereotyped as clever, tricky, and very difficult to outwit. A proverbial expression warns strangers to be wary of Kayserians: "He may not be able to read or write, but if he comes from Kayseri, look out for him!"

²An oversize woven shopping bag, stitched at the sides, and often decorated with colorful designs.

³Sandals with pointed, upturned toes. Made of donkey or camel skin, they were until the mid-20th century the footwear of most rural peasants.

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was very curious about the other man. He therefore moved down the car toward where this well-dressed man was sitting.

People from the province of Kayseri are very clever. Although the Kayserian on the train was only a peasant, he was, like all Kayserians, quite wily. He decided to approach the well-dressed man and discover what kind of person he was. "Selamünaleyküm," he said.

"Aleykümselam,"⁴ the other passenger responded "You are welcome. Why don't you sit here next to me?"

"All right," answered the Kayserian, and took a seat there. After they had talked for a few minutes, he asked the other passenger, "Brother, what are your duties in life?"

"I am a professor."

"What does a professor mean, brother?"

"To make it easy for you to understand, let me say that professor means roughly someone who has read all the books and knows everything in the world."

⁴"May peace be unto you," to which the proper response is, "And may peace be unto you too." These are greetings between Moslems who are not well acquainted. When completed, the exchange is a token of at least minimal friendliness.

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"Oh, really? You mean that you really know everything in the world?" asked the villager.

"Of course I do," said the professor.

The peasant found this very difficult to believe. Being a typical Kayserian, he began to think of some way to test the professor's claim to great knowledge. After a moment he said, "You are a professor and I am only a villager, but let us play a game of asking each other questions. If I cannot answer a question you ask, I shall pay you 10,000 liras. But if you, who know everything, cannot answer a question that I ask, you will pay me 100,000 liras."⁵

The professor thought, "I am a well-educated man, and this villager has little knowledge. He cannot possibly win against me." He therefore said, "Very well."

The Kayserian said, "Go ahead and ask the first question."

⁵ However old this story may be, its references to money are keyed to the value of Turkish currency at the time of the present narration. Until the 1980's or later, neither a villager nor a professor would be likely to have the sums wagered here, but by 1994 the Turkish lira had been so frequently and so sharply devaluated that one U.S. dollar was equal to 36,000 Turkish liras.

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But the professor also wanted to be polite, and so he said, "No, no! You ask the first question."

This was actually what the Kayserian wanted to do. He asked the professor a question that was quite ridiculous: "What has forty feet and 100 nails?"

The professor thought very deeply about this question. He tried to recall the information contained in all of the books that he had read, but he could not remember anything that would help him answer this question. He finally said to the Kayserian, "I don't know," and he handed the villager 100,000 liras.

It was then the professor's turn to ask a question. He said, "I shall not ask you the question I had in mind. Instead, I shall just ask you the same question that you asked me: What has forty feet and 100 nails?"

"I don't know the answer either," answered the Kayserian. "Here are your 10,000 liras."